

What was the Rocky Mountain School and why was it important?

Albert Bierstadt was a member of the Rocky Mountain School of Art. The Rocky Mountain School was a group of artists that traveled west to paint pictures of nature. At the time, most people lived on the east end of the United States. The land out west was fairly new to the United States, and it was difficult for most people to travel. Landscape artists from the Rocky Mountain School were some of the first to paint the natural scenery in the Rocky Mountains and other places out west. Albert Bierstadt went along with government expeditions that traveled west so that he could explore new land. He and other artists had the opportunity of seeing places that most people wouldn't have the chance of seeing. The artists brought back their paintings and showed them to the public. Their artwork depicted the wonders to be found in the Rockies and beyond. Bierstadt and other artists from the Rocky Mountain School had the goal of capturing the indescribable light and overwhelming beauty of America's natural land. Their paintings showed appreciation for America and persuaded congress to set aside land as a national park.

Definitions

landscape: a picture of natural scenery

expedition: a journey or trip undertaken for a specific purpose (such as war or exploring)

congress: the chief lawmaking body of a nation and especially of a republic that in the U.S. is made up of the Senate and the House of Representatives

Source:

<https://anschutcollection.org/about-us/anschut-collection/udson-river-rocky-mountain-schools>

What did the general public think of Bierstadt's art?

Rutherford B. Hayes was president of the United States during Albert Bierstadt's time. He became such a fan of Albert Bierstadt's artwork that he invited Bierstadt to the White House in 1878. Before becoming president, Rutherford B. Hayes saw Bierstadt's work at an exhibit. This is what he said about it: "It is very beautiful and wonderful. By gaslight the effect is incomprehensible, such brilliancy and light and shade! Mr. Bierstadt says it is better by daylight." Bierstadt's paintings went on a year-long tour throughout the United States. His work became so popular that even Queen Victoria invited Bierstadt to England to show his paintings. His painting Rocky Mountains was sold in 1865 for \$25,000. This was the highest price ever paid for a painting up to that point. Bierstadt was a master at showing his art. At this time "great picture" was a word used to describe not only the size of the painting but also the way it was shown. The public loved his paintings and stood in line to view them.

Definitions

exhibit: an article or a collection shown on display

gaslight: light made by burning gas

Sources:

Malczewski, E. *Materiality, iconic nature, and Albert Bierstadt's "Great Pictures,"* 373.

https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/ericmalczewski/files/malczewski_-_materiality_iconic_nature_bierstadt_-_ajcs_-_oct_2016.pdf

What did critics think of Bierstadt's art?

Bierstadt's art became very popular, but some people didn't agree with the way he represented the land in his paintings. Clarence King, a scientist that led geological expeditions into the west from 1867 to 1873 had a different way of seeing the land that Bierstadt was painting, and he was an outspoken critic of Bierstadt's art. This is what he said about Bierstadt and his paintings: "It's all Bierstadt and Bierstadt and Bierstadt nowadays! What has he done but twist and skew and distort and discolor and be-little and be-pretty this whole doggoned country? Why his mountains are too high and slim; they'd blow over in one of our fall winds . . ." (1935 [1872], p. 223)." Clarence King didn't think that Bierstadt's paintings were true to reality. He didn't appreciate how the paintings exaggerated or changed what was seen in real life. Mark Twain, after viewing one of Bierstadt's paintings, said this: "Those snow peaks are correct—they look natural; the valley is correct and natural; the pine trees clinging to the bluff on the right, and the grove on the left, and the boulders, are all like nature. . . . These things are correct—they all look just as they ought to look, and they all belong to California. But when I got around to the atmosphere, I was obliged to say, 'This man has imported this atmosphere from some foreign country, because nothing like it was ever seen in California. . . .' I believe that this atmosphere of Mr. Bierstadt's is altogether too gorgeous."

Definitions

expedition: a journey or trip undertaken for a specific purpose (such as war or exploring)

atmosphere: the air in a particular place

Sources:

King, C. (1935 [1872]) *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.

http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/mountaineering_in_the_sierra_nevada/mountaineering_in_the_sierra_nevada.pdf

Neider, S. M. *Wild Yosemite Personal Accounts of Adventure, Discovery, and Nature*, 130.

https://books.google.com/books?id=oHKo5pInw0QC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

How did Bierstadt display his artwork?

Albert Bierstadt used gaslight to illuminate his work at shows. Gaslight was a new technology at the time, which burned gas to give off light. During this time, most paintings were not displayed with lights, and Bierstadt got a lot of attention for using them. He was a master at setting up a show. He set up the lights very carefully in order to have a dramatic effect on his paintings. He would place his art in dark rooms and carefully place the lights to spotlight paintings, like how an actor is lit up on a theatre stage. His paintings were often hidden behind a large curtain. When the curtain went up, the large painting was dramatically revealed to an audience. The audience was enthralled, and the art was breathtaking when it was unveiled. His paintings were some of the largest of his time. They usually measured somewhere between 9 and 15 feet long! The spectacular size and display of his paintings brought attention from all around the country.

Definition

enthrall: to capture the fascinated attention of

Sources:

Malczewski, E. *Materiality, iconic nature, and Albert Bierstadt's "Great Pictures,"* 367, 373-374.

https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/ericmalczewski/files/malczewski_-_materiality_iconic_nature_bierstadt_-_ajcs_-_oct_2016.pdf

How were decisions made when building the Transcontinental Railroad?

Congressmen wanted the railroad to be built quickly. To ensure a speedy completion, they gave incentives to each railroad company. The railroad companies were paid \$16,000 per mile of track laid on flat prairie land. \$32,000 was given per mile of tracks built on hilly terrain and \$48,000 per mile in the mountains. They were also given 20 sections of land for each mile completed. The Union Pacific Railroad and the Central Pacific Railroad would compete with each other by trying to build the most quickly. The line that built the most miles would get the most cash and land. Since building quickly brought in more cash than building efficiently, the two lines spent little time choosing routes. They just laid track and cashed in. As the Union Pacific builders moved west from Omaha in 1865 along the Platte River, they were paid by the mile, and they sometimes built winding track to collect for more mileage. For construction they used cheap and lightweight iron rails. The railroad builders were focused on building large amounts of track. They cared very little about the quality of their work.

Definitions

incentives: something that makes a person try or work hard or harder

efficiently: producing desired results, especially without waste

Source:

Dynak, D. "The Transcontinental Railroad—Creating Context."

Who were the workers that built the railroad? What was it like for them?

The Central Pacific Railroad started building in Sacramento and worked its way east. The Union Pacific Railroad was being built at the same time. It started in Omaha, Nebraska, and headed west. The plan was to eventually have these two railroad tracks meet in the middle. They needed thousands of workers to lay the track. Irish immigrants were brought in to work on the railroad. The work was difficult and dangerous. The living conditions were uncomfortable and unhealthy. The workers were given a tent to live in and beef and potatoes to eat. Disease started to spread, and avalanches threatened to kill workers in their tents. Some Native Americans were not pleased with the railroad construction, and they would attack the workers. Many of the Irish workers found these conditions unacceptable and decided to quit. The railroad builders found it difficult to keep their workers. They decided to bring in Chinese workers to replace them. The Chinese workers were paid less than the white workers were. The Chinese worked hard and quickly but were treated poorly. When the Chinese workers threatened to strike, supervisors stopped giving them food. This broke the strike, and the Chinese workers went back to work. Civil war veterans and newly freed slaves also joined the workforce on the railroad.

Definitions

avalanche: a large mass of snow and ice or of earth and rock sliding down a mountainside

strike: to stop work for the purpose of forcing an employer to meet demands

Sources:

<https://dp.la/exhibitions/transcontinental-railroad/human-impact/>

Dynak, D. "The Transcontinental Railroad—Creating Context."

How did the railroad affect the Native Americans?

By 1860, many Native American tribes had made deals with the U.S. government by signing treaties and had lost the rights to most of their land. Many of the treaties were not kept by the federal government. At the time, the Native Americans were probably not aware of the railroad and the impact it would have on their life. The construction of the Transcontinental Railroad had drastic consequences for the native tribes of the Great Plains. The railroad was being built in their traditional hunting grounds and caused wildlife to disappear. Historians consider the railroad to be the single biggest contributor to the loss of bison. This was very traumatic to the Plains tribes because they depended on the bison for food, clothing, and many other things. Many tribes felt threatened by the railroad and tried to defend themselves. Some Native Americans tried to prevent the railroad from being built by attacking white settlements. They attacked the railroad tracks, the machinery, and the workers themselves. They would even run away with their livestock. The railroad builders fought back. They knew that the Plains tribes needed the bison to survive. They decided to kill as many bison as possible in order to get rid of the tribes.

Definitions

treaties: agreements or arrangements made by negotiation between two or more political authorities

federal government: a system that divides up power between a strong national government and smaller local governments

livestock: farm animals kept for use and profit

Source:

<https://dp.la/exhibitions/transcontinental-railroad/human-impact/native-americans>

What did the railroad builders think of the Native Americans?

The Union Pacific workers suffered bloody attacks by Native Americans. Members of the Lakota Sioux, Arapaho, and Cheyenne tribes were threatened by the progress of the white man and his “iron horse” across their land. Many of the railroad builders viewed the Plains Indians as an obstacle to be removed. General William Tecumseh Sherman wrote in 1867, “The more we can kill this year, the less will have to be killed the next year, for the more I see of these Indians the more convinced I am that they all have to be killed or be maintained as a species of paupers.” Sherman also had another plan: “Kill the buffalo and you kill the Indian.” Sherman knew that as long as the Lakota Sioux hunted buffalo, they wouldn’t leave. In a letter, Sherman wrote that as long as buffalo roamed those parts of Nebraska, “Indians will go there. I think it would be wise to invite all the sportsmen of England and America there this fall for a Grand Buffalo hunt and make one grand sweep of them all.”

Definitions

iron horse: steam locomotive, train

pauper: a very poor person

Source:

Dynak, D. “The Transcontinental Railroad—Creating Context.”